

Black American Spirit: Ridge Spring, South Carolina

by

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Abstract

Ridge Spring, South Carolina is home to many black American families who have lived there for generations. My paternal ancestors, Irving and Lenons-Williams, are among a few of those families that created a tight-knit community united through their shared hardships and adversity who became farmers, store-owners, and church founders. However, the history and stories of these shared connections is unknown to most of the community and as the eldest generation dies so does that knowledge. This research served as an opportunity to learn and reconstruct this history through sources such as microfilm newspaper records of the town, court documentation involving the community members' who owned land, and personal narrative interviews from some of the eldest in the community. By looking through these lenses I gained a better contextual understanding of this history, which allowed me to piece together this community's connection to the world and to each other. Through this research, I examine the spirituality that exists in various facets of black culture manifesting itself in ways unique to the black experience. Artifacts from this research such as domestic objects, photographs, film, and sound were used in this installation as representations of the culture and livelihood of the community. This installation became a physical manifestation of the collective memory and spirituality of this community while also serving as an acknowledgement of the history.

Introduction

Off of Irving Road in the midst of Ridge Spring, South Carolina resides a small community of black Americans who have lived there for generations. This is the community that my family has been a part of for over 100 years, yet there are few alive in the community with knowledge of its history and the connections of the people that live there. I began researching the history of the land at the Saluda County Courthouse in order to understand how these families came into the property; then I continued my research into news documentation through microfilms for more social context of the area. Through this examination I dissected the research into an examination of what makes up the spirituality of this community and how that spirituality appears in various forms. I identified the shared church, land, and trauma as emergent themes that connected each of us within the community as they are specific to our experience. I also spoke with several elder members of the community who have lived the majority of their lives in the area yet each have a unique perspective on the history. This research culminated in a multimedia installation where I used imagery, sound, objects, and storytelling to create a dimensional space that granting the audience a sense of the community through its' various aspects of spirituality.

Community

Land ownership for black Americans in the south meant independence from their white oppressors, a place to farm, worship, and gather as a community. Land as a physical and spiritual entity holds a significant place in black American history. The earth has sacred importance in African religions so when Africans were enslaved and brought to America, they desired to reconnect with their ancestral land. Tragically, they never got the opportunity but were instead forced to work the new land they were put on and build connections with it.

These enslaved people had a close relationship to the land as they worked it each day and in many ways they formed a different kind of connection to this land.

In Ridge Spring, The Lenons-Williams family were some of the first to own land in the area, however the complete history of the origins of this family and the surrounding families is lost. Elder members of the community have slowly died out leaving only oral stories, court documents, and pictures as a way of tracing their history. According to court records my great-grandfather, Red Lenon, owned over fifty acres of land that he cultivated and farmed as the church was built along this dirt road sanctuary. This is the land that in his death he bequeathed my grandmother and great aunt, Artise and Juanita, and it will be passed to me by my father. The Williams family, according to my father, owned over 100 acres of land where they ran businesses. The Johnson family, my grandfathers's maternal side, owned a grits mill on that land that served as one of the food sources for the community. When my grandfather, Robert Irving Sr., married my grandmother he divided the land and sold it to surrounding families for them to build upon.

Ridge Branch Baptist Church has served this community for decades, founded by the ancestors of the same families who continue to attend service. This church was one of the first in the town created by and for black people as they gained their freedom. It is thought that the first church in town, Ridge Spring Baptist Church, which is no longer active had several black members who eventually left to create several of the other churches that still stand today. Reverend Jerry and Sylvia Williams, distant relatives of mine, founded both Ridge Branch Baptist Church and another church in the area, Olive Branch Baptist Church. Ridge Branch has served as many different things for its' members on an individual level

including a symbol and place of refuge, and for me personally it was a place for me to celebrate my blackness as a child.

United by the church and the land that these families reside on the sense of community is strengthened between them as they provided for themselves and each other. Families also helped teach and raise children in the community reaffirming the phrase “it takes a village.” As part of this project I interviewed Maisy Padgett, age 74, who spoke devotedly of the role she plays with Ridge Branch Baptist Church giving many anecdotes of what now passed members of the church have done for her and her family personally. Maisy Padgett spoke of my great aunt Juanita Lenon’s role as a teacher in the community, teaching Maisy to drive and helping others in their education. She stated, “Yeah Neat (Juanita Lenon) taught me – taught a lot of us at the church – how to cook, how to bake. Oh and I loved cousin Artise, she was a softie you know she was always right there when you needed her. But you know, all our families had large families and all of us got along well.” (M. Padgett, personal communication, 2018). While speaking with Maisy Padgett, I could only reminisce on being corralled by ‘Ms Maisy’ as she took care of all the kids during service. She took on the role of caregiver early in her life and has continued that role for decades. Through my research, I have learned that she represents the living memory of this church community as she kept every program and obituary from the church for over sixty years.

For Maisy Padgett her identity as the church’s unofficial historian is intertwined with the mission of the church and it’s community. I found a similar attituded when I was interviewing Robert Irving Jr, my father. Both came from the same generation, they grew up seeing their parents and grandparents serve as members of the church. The church was made

up entirely of closely related and distant family members, whether cousins or aunts and uncles. For Robert Irving Jr., his unshakeable devotion to the Bible and God has kept his faith alive throughout the years. His perspective is that the church is a place to gather in the name of God but also a place to help advance the surrounding community and uplift it (R. Irving, personal communication, 2019).

When conducting interviews in the community, I witnessed a moment each interviewee had as they spoke of the community and their faith where they became emotional or as many would say 'lost themselves in the spirit.' It was especially noticeable with Daniel Newell, age 86, who did not grow up in this area but married his late wife who was from one of the founding families of the area. When speaking about how God has blessed him with a beautiful life he began crying and asked to pray, which was a surprising and intimate moment of this research (D. Newell, personal communication, 2018).

Spirituality

Spirituality has made a recurring appearance within the lives and culture of black Americans. Black churches are the most obvious places to witness black spirituality but it also manifests itself in different forms of dance, music, and in community gatherings. Dance and music are heavily intertwined in the black community and have existed simultaneously since before slavery. In the church, dance and music serve as a way to praise God and connect with your spirituality. Spirituality can loosely be defined within the black church as a way of connecting to yourself, God, and your ancestors. It opens us up to what we feel and know inherently as spiritual beings. Before the establishment of the church in the black community, music and dance served as a metaphysical connection for slaves to their African heritage and ancestry. They were a celebration, a memorial, an experience.

In the African diaspora view, spirit is understood variously as an unseen power, such as God, a divinity, a generative life force, a soul force, and a cultural ethos of a people, all of which have distinctive interpretations across different cultures. This view also holds that spirit (and spirituality) suffuses all aspects of black life and courses through the way blacks understand and express themselves. (Defrantz, 2014)

Spirituals developed during slavery from a combination of African “ring rituals” and the black American version of “ring shouts.” The term ‘spiritual’ actually originated in South Carolina and they eventually developed to also become a form of communication between slaves (Johnson, 1999). A subtle shift in song lyrics could determine whether it was safe to escape that night, or warn of a master’s foul mood that day. Harriet Tubman created several of her own songs as a way to communicate with slaves she planned to help escape (Tobin, 2000). Spirituals served a dual purpose in the black community and now that the threat of slavery has ended they now mostly serve as a way to connect to the history of the people and continue to share their hardships with each other. Spirituals are unique in being one of the only definitive connections black Americans have to their ancestors. When sung, spirituals exist beyond time and space as a powerful expression of pain, joy, and livelihood that every black American both in the past and present has experienced.

African ring rituals use song, dance, and drums to manifest and strengthen the union between the material and spiritual worlds as part of religious expression.

Each element in this trinity had its unique role to play. Dance, for example, was a way of generating or increasing what Samuel A. Floyd terms ache. Ache, according to African rite scholars, is the life force that pulsates through the body. This life force manifests itself in the passion with which the ring shout is performed. Their bodies were swaying to the rhythms of the drum and moving through space and time. The dancers moved without limitations. The drum was so powerful that it could speak to the dancer’s soul as well as carry messages to distant places. Dancing in a ring formation affirmed communal solidarity and provided an opportunity to be free of all internal pressure. Slaves brought this ritual to America and adapted it to suit their new situation (Tobin, 2000).

Aspects of the original ring rituals and ring shouts have become embedded in different parts of contemporary worship. During a church service, song and dance are used a way to ‘stir the spirit’ both the Holy Spirit and in each person. As each person sings the song is uplifted and everyone moves in a unified rock of the body side to side with clapping and the stomping of feet. This is perhaps one of the most glaring differences in worship in the black American community compared to other cultures. The more effort expended in shouting, clapping, rocking, and singing the more the spirit is stirred creating a powerful, transcendent experience.

Another way these ring rituals shifted into modern culture is in the goings-on and occurrences when a community of black Americans get together. At family reunions, celebrations, and sometimes even funerals fellowship and laughter are important aspects of these gatherings. Line dances created out of the black community are integral to these events for reasons deeper than everyone doing the same moves together. When participating in a line dance at these gatherings, the moves become second-nature and the joy of being around people that live the same situation as you do as a black person in America becomes more important. Dance builds stronger bonds between people in a community and in instances such as a family reunion or church event, it provides the opportunity to exist in the jubilation of being together and united. Ring rituals have organically shifted into aspects of black culture, yet even if they are not consciously thought of as ring rituals by most today their purpose of connecting the spirit remains the same.

Whether intentionally or accidentally black Americans today continue to seek and explore ways they can connect with this ‘ache’ and achieve those moments of higher spirituality and transcendence that their ancestors sought. These moments can be brief, they

can last for an extended period but their significance for black Americans is the peace and release they seem to bring to an otherwise painful and disconnected experience. I have witnessed the ache occur in Ridge Branch Baptist Church repeatedly, and I have felt the way the spirit can move a group of people. Enslaved black people were reported to have worshipped bodily and heartily by throwing themselves into spiritual rejoicing. This is in many ways how I grew up seeing community members worshipping. I remember witnessing the shouting and singing everyone participated in during church services. I remember my dad passionately praying by his bedside or giving my sister and I life lessons through scripture. They all rely on the Spirit to help them process a world that sees them as less than.

Trauma

Black Americans today have an estimate of five generations between them and their enslaved ancestors since the abolishment of slavery in the United States. This does not account for illegal slavery that lasted into the 1960s in some areas of the South, sharecropping (another form of indentured servitude that limited resources and mobility), or mass incarceration, which has been deemed the ‘modern form of slavery’ for black and brown Americans. Violent, physical acts inflicted on black bodies during slavery was always accompanied, if not enhanced, by the psychological torture and trauma of existing as a slave. Slave owners relentlessly reinforced their superiority and blacks’ inferiority through manipulation and violence. In response, slaves raised their children in preparation for a lifetime of abuse with no power or authority (Leary, 2017). James P. Comer writes:

The slave family existed to serve the master and in order to survive physically, psychologically and socially the slave family had to develop a system which made survival possible under degrading conditions. The slave society prepared the young to accept exploitation and abuse, to ignore the absence of dignity and respect for themselves as blacks. The social, emotional and psychological price of this adjustment is well known (Leary, 2017).

Dr. Joy Degruy explores the ramifications of slavery on black Americans by identifying the Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome. She examines the psychological effects slavery has had on the black community in how we are raised to think of ourselves, treat ourselves, and how that is transmitted through each generation. This ‘legacy of trauma’ as she deems it originated from necessity and survival but it continues to affect the community in ways that combined with systemic racism further lead to the detriment of the community.

Degruy speaks of the treatment of our bodies both historically and presently, and how spanking and threatening children to prevent them from endangering themselves amongst white people has affected our mentality. However, she also notes that the body carries trauma in stress genes, which can be passed genetically and affect development and behavior (Leary, 2017). This provokes interesting thoughts on how black bodies today carry some of the same physical trauma that their ancestors endured. These are our bodies that interact with society on a level that our ancestors could not access, but we are still limited in many of the same ways due to our blackness.

Present

As the children of these families grow up and leave, the farmers and cow herders grow old. Cows have been sold and farming has been abandoned as the way of life in this area adjusts to the present time. For so long untouched by modernity and technology the youngest generations of these families leave for more opportunities as the land grows desolate and litter-filled. In ten years, all of the elders will likely be dead. In fifty years, the history will mostly be forgotten. This small community forged its own distinctive existence out of racism and hardships, yet now it feels like watching an era die. Something that I have

struggled with in this community is that there was never a sense of urgency to educate and empower the youth as I was growing up.

The ideals and opinions of the church also played a central role in the rejection of progressive values causing a rift between the elders and the youth. Teenage pregnancies and incomplete educations continue to affect the younger generations of my community, yet there is no acknowledgment or assistance from older members of the community. In my opinion it will become essential in the coming years for the community to make more efforts to mentor and embrace the younger members so that the history will live on and the community can begin to thrive again.

Multimedia Installation

I created a multimedia installation as part of this project using objects of significance from my grandparents' home, including clothing, cookware, photographs, and décor. As part of the installation, archival VHS videos of Ridge Branch Baptist Church services played on a television while audio I edited from church services and various songs played within the space to help create the atmosphere. The objects and photographs are displayed almost reverently in a similar manner that altars or ofrendas in Latino culture are created for familial relationships. I also filmed and edited a video that was projected into the space that showed more of the present look of the community in contrast to the artifacts of the past. Along with this I created acrylic image transfers from the multitude of photographs my father gave me that show the church community bonding each Sunday with special meals and celebration.

The process of the transfers creates this image independent of paper that is transparent yet more durable than a printed image. As part of the performance aspect of this installation I ritualistically rubbed remaining paper fibers from the individual transfers and

adhered them to the glass window to complete the visual aspect of the installation. I performed this action repeatedly as I relayed the history I learned of this community in a storytelling format to audiences. By bringing these objects, these people, and this history out into the light it felt like a true acknowledgment of my own family history and a way of giving thanks to those who have come before.

Conclusion

The research I did into the community's history served to help me get more perspectives and stories to flush out the complexities of this history. However, as the project continues into the future I plan to speak with a greater variety of community members and gather more personal narratives. I am left with questions about the similarities rural towns such as Ridge Spring share and how other small black communities in the south have survived. As the project grew the research became more specific into some of the most recent generations' histories. This allowed for a more succinct focus, however I hope to broaden the scope of this research further back into this specific community's history as I continue this project. I also see this research examining collective memory and cultural identity further as it relates to this community and communities like it.

The multimedia installation served as a way for me to process this research and examine how community is a part of spirituality. The project and its installation will be shared with the community as one of the stages of this research as it continues to evolve. This installation will later include a movement portion that involves the pursuit of *ache* with myself and possibly other members of the community to explore the link between trauma and spirituality as it relates to this area. By sharing the stories and connections with the rest of the

community, specifically the younger generations, our appreciation and pride for the land and each other will increase.

Projected Video and Audio for Installation: <https://youtu.be/ioHjLNGRuuA>

Video Documentation of Thesis Defense and Installation: <https://youtu.be/ZJiu-65tJ6o>



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